

Catechesis of the Good Shepherd



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The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd was developed in the 1950s in Rome by Sofia Cavalletti, a scholar of the bible and Judaism, with Gianna Gobbi, a Montessori educator, who were preparing together a small group of children for First Communion. They had been asked to do so by Adele Costa Gnocchi, one of Maria Montessori's most far-sighted collaborators, who had opened a Children's House in the center of Rome for the education of little ones.

Costa Gnocchi had long intended to renew an experience that had begun many years earlier in Barcelona and that for various reasons could not be continued. This experience led to the birth of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Math and the Good Shepherd

Going back to the origins is useful for understanding, and it is always necessary in order to fully understand how a certain experience has come down to us and is still alive today. In Barcelona, about a century ago, after the First World War, a teacher – in order to help children in the elementary classes understand addition and subtraction – had discovered a simple but effective method: using small wooden cubes placed one above the other, or separated. Amassing the cubes means addition, separating them instead, subtraction, and so on.^[1]

The teacher, who was Catholic, found herself attending a liturgical Congress and asked one of the speakers, the Abbot of the Benedictines of Montserrat, what was important to initiate children into the experience of faith and prayer. The abbot replied promptly: "The Bible and the liturgy, especially Mass."

But how to teach them to children? Attending Mass with their parents was certainly fundamental, but it did not facilitate their involvement and active participation in the liturgy. So began research on how to interest children in understanding the Mass. It was decided to present them with some suitable material to make them understand the parts. Somehow, the kind of material used for the mathematical method came into play. The task was not easy, yet it led to the discovery of children's ability to understand the mysteries of faith. From there she began a search for a catechesis that later took the name "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd."

The teacher's name was Maria Montessori; she was a doctor (one of the first women to graduate from the Rome's Sapienza University, child psychiatrist and educator. She had an extraordinary passion for the training and education of children, especially the marginalized and disabled. She had discovered the importance of capturing the attention of children and making them the principal agents in their own lives.

Montessori was particularly attracted to and amazed by the spiritual abilities of children from the very first years of life: "Children are so capable of distinguishing between natural and supernatural things that their intuition made us think of a *period of religious alertness*,"^[2] a time when children have insights and religious impulses that are remarkable. The expression may be surprising, but one is astonished to read in the Declaration on Christian Education of the Second Vatican Council the statement that children "from an early age are able to perceive the sense of God," and that the task of parents is "to help them develop it."^[3]

Religious instruction appeared to Montessori as the culmination of what was lived in the children's houses, and she described the experience in three books, including *I bambini viventi nella Chiesa (Children Living in the Church)*, where she argues: "The necessary complement to religious instruction at an early age is the liturgy made accessible to children."^[4] The result was surprising: "By centering religious education on the liturgy, Montessori shows that she understood the fundamental importance of the 'sign' in catechesis. Signs do not so much present truths to the mind to be understood, but rather reproduce situations, facts, so that people of all times can be participants and actors.

The catechesis by 'signs' is therefore free from any intellectualism, and is in the fullest sense a help to the religious life of the child. In this fundamental direction lies the permanent value of Montessori's work in the religious field and those who seek to continue it today are deeply grateful to her for this precious legacy."⁵¹

Montessori had discovered that from the inner feelings of the child "a very grateful sense of joy and new dignity" sprang forth, a joy which is an expression of inner growth and that dignity which commits the adult to respect the principle of "giving the greatest things to the smallest," according to the Lord's teaching: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to children" (*Matthew* 11:25).

The Children's House

Montessori moved from Barcelona to Rome, in 1954. For various personal reasons, she was unable to complete her research in the religious field, which was continued and taken to heart by her pupil and collaborator, Adele Costa Gnocchi, in the *Casa dei Bambini* in Rome, near the Chiesa Nuova. The educator lived in a building opposite that of Sofia Cavalletti, a friend whom she knew very well. She asked her to prepare some children for First Communion. Cavalletti was an assistant at the University of Rome to the former rabbi, Eugenio Zolli and was engaged in the study of Talmudic treatises. She would later translate from Hebrew the books of Isaiah and Proverbs for the Florentine edition of the Bible, and Judith and Esther for the Pauline Press' "Nuovissima" translation.

In this new project she was joined by the Montessori educationist, Gianna Gobbi. Their work started from the reading of the Bible, in particular the parables, because the Gospels state that this was the kind of teaching preferred by Jesus. As for the liturgy, the parts of the Mass were explained so that children could understand its meaning.

Scripture and liturgy are precisely the sources that the Church's tradition and its bi-millennial history have always recognized as fundamental for the life of faith of the Christian. Cavalletti writes: "The response that children give to their religious experience is such that it seems to involve them deeply, giving total

satisfaction. [...] The ease and spontaneity of a child's religious expression and prayer make one think of something that springs from the depths, almost as if it were connatural to the child."¹⁶¹

The Bible

The central point of catechesis is the most important truth of Christianity: the vital relationship between God and his creatures, in biblical terms "The Covenant." Children show that they discover and experience it through direct listening to the Word.¹⁶² The method for presenting it is simple: one reads the biblical text, then gives the children time to assimilate it.

Among the biblical texts, the Johannine parable of the Good Shepherd exerts a particular attraction. Among the multifaceted aspects of the text, children prefer one: "He calls his own sheep by name" (*John* 10:3) and they listen to his voice and follow him. The extraordinary enchantment that this verse arouses in children is documented by the quantity and quality of their responses, both in written expressions and in drawings.

It is an element of the parable that has given rise to only fleeting hints in the ancient and modern exegetical tradition. Cavalletti comments: "The 'calling by name' by Jesus is a call to life. [...] In the pastor who calls him or her by name the child recognizes the God of the great biblical tradition [...] who – as Augustine says – *intus docet*."¹⁶³ "The response [of the children to the parable] is the enchantment that is expressed in long contemplative silences, in coming back many times to listen to it and to work with the related material; in the kisses given to the shepherd or to the sheep; in the burst of joy at the moment when they discover that we are the sheep."¹⁶⁴ The child easily identifies with them, and a relationship of trust, protection and affection is created. Above all, a child is struck by the fact that, if a sheep is lost, the shepherd leaves all the others in the fold and goes looking for it until he finds it again, as if the lost sheep were the most important of all.

After the text is read, the material that makes it concrete is fundamental, to help children understand it, especially when they still cannot read it and to allow them to come back alone, whenever and how often they want to, in order, to enjoy it and meditate on it. In the case of the Johannine parable, the material is given by wooden models of the shepherd, the sheep and the sheepfold: all the

elements mentioned in the text and the only ones. Personal work with the material is a fundamental moment because the child makes the parable his or her own and goes on to make continuous discoveries.¹²⁰ Here prayer is born, almost spontaneously. This involves being in the presence of the Shepherd as confidant and friend. The method is sound, for it is an education in prayer and teaches how to pray.¹²¹

The voice and faith of children thus also enrich the faith experience of adults. It is no coincidence that some parents, surprised by the inner change in their children and having grasped the value of the catechesis, have in turn offered to train as catechists.

Signs of understanding: joy

How do we come to understand if the children have grasped something of the biblical text that was presented to them? One sign is immediately obvious: their shining faces and the joy of having discovered an important reality for their lives. “The source of joy in children lies in the message they receive, and only in it, transmitted in its closest objectivity and with the simplicity that is proper to the greatest things.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd shuns those tricks that, unfortunately, are often thought to attract a child: games, jokes, prizes or similar gimmicks, which involve a lack of reverence toward the word of God and are an offence to the human creature. The message attracts by itself and not because we make it ‘entertaining,’ which would be tantamount to trivializing it. Joy is the means by which children express their own ‘Here I am,’ responding to that Voice which, as partners in the covenant, they recognize in the depths of their hearts [...] For the covenant to be truly such, there must be a response to those who take the initiative in it, a response that can take many forms. But that of the child – it seems to us – is of the best quality: the children’s response is to enjoy the presence of God in their lives. The child enters into the covenant by the ‘path of holy joy’ and enters it with all the dignity of a partner.”¹²²

Another parable – that of the mustard seed – helps the child to understand how from a very small seed, almost a pinhead, a large tree can be born, so that birds can rest in its branches (cf. *Matthew* 13:31-32, and parallels). It is the parable of the Kingdom of God, which grows from virtually nothing, releases an impressive

energy, and comes to embrace all people. The little ones are capable of grasping what is greatest and most essential in the Gospel message. Here the material consists of the same grain of mustard, which is truly “the smallest of all seeds” (*Matthew 13:32*). It is also the mystery of growth and life that the child experiences within.

Liturgy

Since Scripture finds its fullness in the liturgy,^[15] the Bible is lived in the liturgical celebration, where one is nourished “from the table of both the Word of God and the Body of Christ.”^[14] In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd the liturgy becomes the other foundation on which the child can build a personal relationship with the Lord.^[15]

“With regard to the Liturgy, what strikes us is the extraordinary ability that children demonstrate in penetrating deeply into the language of the signs through which, far from being reduced to a complex of rites, the liturgy manifests its fundamental function, to celebrate what the Bible reveals and what faith believes. It is precisely the connection between the Bible and the Liturgy that most expresses so many of the children’s drawings. Emblematic is that of a little Colombian boy six years old, who, having by now discovered that the sheep in the parable of the Good Shepherd are ‘people,’ after being told that the ‘drops of water’ that join the wine in the preparation of the Eucharistic chalice represent our humanity, illustrated the point by replacing the drops with sheep.”^[16]

This is the “religious potential of the child,” which Cavalletti also calls their “mysterious knowledge”: “It is a fact that in the religious field children know things that no one has told them.”^[17] And she gives an impressive example that happened during a presentation of Baptism. She wanted to explain the meaning of the imposition of hands to children aged four to six, but she thought it was too difficult for that age, yet she tried: “I took a ring in my hand, stretched out my arm two or three times and opened my hand, dropping the object, and explaining that this is what I have to do if I want to give them a gift. Then I repeated the gesture without the ring, saying, ‘At baptism, the priest does this with the child, but you can’t see anything falling. Why does he do that?’ The children answered in chorus, as if the question had been completely superfluous: ‘Because he gives us the Holy Spirit.’ Two students of theology were present; I

saw them wince. Where did those children get this knowledge from? I cannot answer that; what is certain is that they knew.”^[18]

The same happens in the celebration of Mass: the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine, but nothing is seen to fall. Why does he do this? Lucia, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl, answered: “He calls the Spirit on the bread and wine.”^[19]

The experience of catechesis has been described in two books, *The Religious Potential of the Child from 3 to 6 years old* and *Between 6 and 12 years old*,^[20] and in an anthology of writings collected by Francesca and Patrizia Cocchini.^[21]

You start at age three...

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd begins at the age of three. This is the first level. Today educationists have shown that the first years of a child are fundamental for the rest of their lives.

Catechesis develops during childhood and adolescence, always through biblical and liturgical deepening. After the age of six, the growth of the child requires a broadening of the themes. This is the second level. The moral need for act and behave begins. Here the maxims of the Gospel (cf. *Matt* 5:20-48), the weapons of light (cf. *Eph* 6:11-18) and the parable of the merciful Father (cf. *Luke* 15) appear appropriate, helping to prepare for First Confession and Communion, in which the encounter with the Good Shepherd is the climax. Freedom should also be emphasized in the choice of the moment at which to receive First Communion: it is the children themselves who decide when it is time to receive the sacrament, helped by family members, catechists and the priest.

‘One is your Master’ (Matt 23:8).

Another characteristic should also be noted in conclusion: the role of the catechist. They “should not seek to attract to themselves, their personal opinions or attitudes the attention and adherence of the intelligence and hearts of those being catechized; and, above all, they should not seek to inculcate their personal opinions and options, as if they expressed the doctrine and lessons of the life of Jesus Christ. Every catechist should be able to apply to him or herself the mysterious words of Jesus: ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me’ (*John* 7:16). This is what Saint Paul does when he deals with a matter of primary

importance: 'For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you' (1 Cor 11:23). [...] How detached catechists must be from themselves to be able to say: 'My doctrine is not mine!'"¹²²¹ In short, one alone is the Master and the guide of catechesis, the Lord Jesus, while catechists, as the Gospel says, are "useless servants" (Luke 17:10). Hence the objectivity that must guide their work, especially when the little ones approach the Word of God.¹²³¹

However, there is also a second teacher, notes Sofia Cavalletti, and it is the children, "who are not books, but are certainly teachers. They are teachers without knowing it, who do not have a professorship and for this very reason their response is more incisive. [...] Both the Bible and the children have made me find within myself values that had clearly been given to me as a gift, something that I had not sought, had never asked for or even desired, and in which I had to recognize all the gratuitousness of the gift. It was something that was not the result of a conscious effort, and for which I could only be infinitely grateful."¹²⁴¹

The surprise of catechesis

From the 1960s onward, alongside the activity with children, training courses for adults have also been held: courses that often end with examinations and the awarding of diplomas recognized by the Catechetical Office of the Vicariate of Rome.

A not insignificant element of this catechesis is the speed with which it has spread not only in parishes, formation centers and religious schools, but also in other nations and continents. It has spread to Central and Eastern Europe, crossed the ocean to the indigenous peoples of Mexico, to the United States among the Amerindians, and has also experienced ecumenical development. Especially in the United States, it met with great acceptance among Episcopalians and Protestants, as well as among the Orthodox, the sign of the Gospel that unites. Today the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has also been welcomed by the Missionaries of Charity, the Sisters of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. They have used it in the Bronx, in New York, and also in various countries of Central America. Since 2009 they have adopted it in all environments where they work.

In 2014, an International Good Shepherd Catechesis Conference was held in Phoenix, Arizona: 856 catechists from 26 nations on five continents attended.

Two years later, in Mexico, in the State of Chiapas, in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, a conference was organized for Mexican catechists with about 450 people taking part.

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^[11]. Cf. M. Montessori, *La scoperta del bambino*, Milan, Garzanti, 1950, 288 f.

^[12]. *Ibid.*, 325.

^[13]. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, No. 3.

^[14]. M. Montessori, *I bambini viventi nella Chiesa*, 1922, now in Id., *Opere di Maria Montessori*, Milan, Garzanti, 1970, 12. The other two works are: *La vita in Cristo*, 1931, and *La Santa Messa spiegata ai bambini*, 1932.

^[15]. S. Cavalletti, "Introduzione", M. Montessori, *Opere di Maria Montessori*, op. cit., 5 f.

^[16]. S. Cavalletti, *Il potenziale religioso del bambino. Descrizione di un'esperienza con bambini da 3 a 6 anni*, Rome, Città Nuova, 1979, 35.

^[17]. Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, Vatican City, Libr. Ed. Vaticana, 2020, Nos. 91-94.

^[18]. Id., *La catechesi del buon Pastore. Antologia di testi scelti*, edited by F.P. Cocchini, Bologna, EDB, 2015, 30.

^[19]. *Ibid.*

^[10]. The reasons why we are asked to make the material with our own hands are various: to help the personal absorption of the contents; to combat efficiency, haste and consumerism; to assume in our work a rhythm more in keeping with that of the child and the work of the Spirit within us; and finally to achieve integration between hand, mind and heart (cf. *ibid.*, 59).

¹¹¹. *Ibid.*, 113-118. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis, op. cit.*, Nos. 86-87.

¹¹². *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹³. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis, op. cit.*, Nos. 95-98.

¹¹⁴. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dei Verbum*, Nos. 6 and 21.

¹¹⁵. Essential among the elements of catechesis are the centrality of the Eucharist and the way it is celebrated. It's the children themselves who, with the help of the family, the catechists and the priest, discern the moment in which to receive it; the retreat of preparation for First Communion lasts four days, from morning to evening, even on the day of First Communion, so that the children are not too soon distracted by what they have lived. The celebration of First Reconciliation is solemnly linked to the baptismal signs of the white garment and light and, when there are catechumens, to the celebration of baptism. Cf. S. Cavalletti, *La catechesi del Buon Pastore, op. cit.*, 55-60.

¹¹⁶. F. Cocchini, "La 'catéchèse du bon Pasteur', une application de la méthode Montessori", in *Communio*, No. 262, 2019, 121 ff.

¹¹⁷. S. Cavalletti, *Il potenziale religioso del bambino...*, *op. cit.*, 36.

¹¹⁸. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹. *Ibid.*

¹²⁰. *Id.*, *Il potenziale religioso del bambino...*, *op. cit.*; *Id.*, *Il potenziale religioso tra i 6 e i 12 anni. Descrizione di un'esperienza*, Rome, Città Nuova, 1996.

¹²¹. *Id.*, *La catechesi del buon Pastore...*, *op. cit.*; cf. the manuals for catechesis: S. Cavalletti – G. Gobbi, "Io sono il Buon Pastore". *Guida per i catechisti* and *Album per i bambini*, vols. 1-5. Rome, Coletti, 1970 (reprint: Todi, Tau, 2007).

¹²². John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979), No. 6.

¹²³. It is the catechist's task to deepen the Christian message through the knowledge of the biblical-liturgical sources, of their life in tradition and of the theological, ecumenical and social movements that animate the life of the Church today; to prepare and keep in order the *atrium*, that is, the environment where

the meetings take place and where the children live the religious experience together with the adults: it must be a place that helps concentration, silence, contemplation of the child and the adult; to prepare the material personally, using collaborators for those fields that are beyond their abilities (cf. Cavalletti, *La catechesi del Buon Pastore... , op. cit.*, 59).

^[24]. *Ibid.*, 14.